

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of March 20, 1950

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Consul"

Daily Mirror

March 16, 1950

'Consul' a Dramatic Blast At Brutalitarian Rule

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Consul," which Chandler Cowles and Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., brought to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last evening, the versatile Gian-Carlo Menotti delivers a slashing operatic blow at totalitarianism—Nazism, Black Fascism and Red Fascism, or Communism, if you prefer.

We hope all the local comrades who think life behind the Iron Curtain is just dandy will see "The Consul." It might help to open the eyes of these dim-witted dupes, and it will certainly make good Americans proud of their democratic Republic. Though the Menotti work is in operatic form, it also is terrific theatre. It had the Barrymore's sturdy walls vibrating from salvos of cheers.

"The Consul" is a vivid, terrifying picture of life in a country under brutalitarian rule. Patriots and lovers of freedom are hounded by squads of vicious, strong-arm secret police. One of the protestants against tyranny escapes across the border, leaving behind his mother, wife and child. He instructs the wife to go

to the Consul of an unnamed nation for visas, so that they may join him in exile.

The wife becomes frantic at the delays involved in getting the papers, since she is being persecuted by the secret police. She is one of many baffled by the ways of consular red-tape. The people who come to the office are those "whose name is a number, whose story is a case, whose hopes are on file."

Mrs. Sorel—that's the wife's name—loses her mother-in-law and son. Her worried husband returns to see her and is captured. In despair, she finally takes her own life.

Patricia Neway, vocally and histrionically, is heartbreaking as the hapless Mrs. Sorel. Her dynamic, bravura performance

Musical play by Gian-Carlo Menotti; staged by Mr. Menotti; scenery by Horace Armistead; costumes by Grace Houston; musical co-ordination by Thomas Schippers; orchestra conductor, Lehman Engel; dream choreography by John Butler; presented by Chandler Cowles and Efrem Zimbalist Jr. at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, March 15, 1950.

The cast:
John Sorel....Cornell MacNeil
Magda Sorel....Patricia Neway
The Mother....Marie Powers
Chief Police Agent....Leon Lishner
1st Police Agent....Chester Watson
2nd Police Agent....Donald Blackley
The Secretary....Gloria Lane
Mr. Kofner....George Jongeyans

won an ovation that lasted several minutes. And it was eminently deserved. Marie Powers, who scored a triumph in Menotti's "The Medium," is excellent as the mother-in-law.

Gloria Lane is outstanding as the Consul's harassed secretary. George Jongeyans sings beautifully as an elderly, unfortunate caught in the toils of bureaucracy. Salutes are due Cornell MacNeil, Leon Lishner, Maria Mario, Maria Andreassi, Lydia Summers and Andrew McKinley.

McKinley gives one of the most interesting virtuoso displays of the season, as a magician. He not only sings and acts

"THE CONSUL"

The Foreign Woman.....
Maria Mario
Anna Gomez...Maria Andreassi
Vera Boronell...Lydia Summers
Nika Magadoff...Andrew McKinley
Assan.....Francis Monachino
Voice on Record...Mabel Mercer

Synopsis: The action takes place somewhere in Europe. Act I: Scene 1, the home, early morning; Scene 2, the consulate, later the same day. Act II: Scene 1, the home, in the evening, a month later; Scene 2, the consulate, a few days later. Act III: Scene 1, the consulate, late afternoon, several days later; Scene 2, the home, that night.

the role to the hilt, but, coached by Fred Keating, performs several tricks with the skill of a Blackstone.

An onrushing deadline prevents us from paying merited tribute to others who contributed effectively to the town's newest hit. The first-night audience was like several pages of a musical Who's Who, come to life. Even that genius of the baton, Arturo Toscanini, was present. It was a truly exciting evening. Take our advice, and buy your tickets immediately. Otherwise you may not be able to see "The Consul" for a long time, and it is something that must be seen.

New York Post HOME NEWS

March 16, 1950

A Police State in Musical Drama

By Richard Watts Jr.

Gian-Carlo Menotti, the oncoming boy wonder of the American musical drama, has composed and directed what I, rather an uncomfortable critical outsider at such earnest lyric festivals, take to be his most ambitious and theatrically striking work in "The Consul," which had its tumultuous opening at the Ethel Barrymore last night. With a brilliant new singing actress named Patricia Neway scoring spectacularly in the leading role, this latest example of the opera that calls itself the theatre is an inescapably impressive achievement.

Judged as drama, which is the way I chiefly have to judge it, "The Consul" seems to me considerably more successful than Mr. Menotti's highly admired musical thriller, "The Medium," which was hailed more rhapsodically in other quarters than it was

by this reviewer. It still is my impression that the music complicates and neutralizes the emotional and theatrical effectiveness of the narrative almost as frequently as it heightens it, but there are also times when it provides a dramatic intensity that can be close to overwhelming.

Patricia Neway

In great part, that intensity is due to the brilliant presence of Miss Neway. A gauntly handsome young woman with a mask

of sheer tragedy that can express all the suffering of a world in torment, this remarkable new player, who is experienced in concert work but has been seen on Broadway only in "The Rape of Lucretia" last season, manages to make the doomed heroine of "The Consul" both an appealing human being and a moving symbol of the unhappy womanhood of a tortured continent. Miss Neway scores one of the real triumphs of the year.

In his new work, Mr. Menotti is dramatizing at once the horror of a police state and the unfeeling inhumanity of diplomatic red-tape. His scene shifts back and forth between a home shadowed by the secret police and the consulate of some happier land. The tragedy he sets down is essentially the tragedy of waiting, of waiting for the ominous knock of the totalitarian policeman on the door or for the never-arriving visa that might open a land of freedom to the hopeless refugee. He ends on an ironic note, with policeman and red tape triumphant, and his fugitives destroyed between them.

The Mood

He is at his best in capturing the bitterness of his mood,

whether it is the grim, lost atmosphere of the police state or the cold impersonality of the consular bureaucracy. And he is least effective, I think, in his story of the wife who is trying to get her visa and escape from the land of tyranny to join her husband before he returns from freedom to her side. The narrative is not always dramatically interesting, but the atmosphere always is. He does not mention the names of countries or even let his consul appear, but this abstract quality does not interfere with reality.

While Miss Neway completely dominates the evening, the lesser characters are also well cast. Marie Powers, who starred in "The Medium," has little to do but does it well as a grandmother, and Gloria Lane as a consular secretary who is not quite as impersonal as she seems. Andrew McKinley as a magician seeking a visa, and Leon Lishner as a sinister police agent are particularly good. "The Consul" is sometimes difficult and prolix, and to me, it is by no means always completely effective dramatically, but it is both chilling and impressive.

"The Consul"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
March 16, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

THE PLAY

Rings With Passion

A MUSICAL drama of lurid and sombre fascination has opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, "The Consul," by Gian-Carlo Menotti, is a threnody about the dispossessed, living in a police state somewhere in Europe and having no way of escape. The dramatist-composer-director has achieved scenes of high theatrical excitement and moments of genuine poignance. Particularly in the second act does this melodrama, in the true and original sense of that word, ring with passion and meaning. The performances have the proper flourish, the settings and costumes are effective, and the musical accompaniment gives added eloquence to the writing.

Menotti was prompted to his present project after the success of his twin bill, "The Medium" and "The Telephone" in 1947. A newspaper headline about a woman who committed suicide after not being able to secure a visa coupled with his own memories of life in a country where the border was an insurmountable barrier have had rich, if somewhat doleful fruition in "The Consul." The stern simplicity of "The Medium" is wanting in his new show. It has a tendency to grow monotonous, as the action shifts from an impoverished flat to a consulate and back again. But there is a fine stage style which makes even the laggard moments of the work interesting.

At least Menotti has cut no corners in trying to bring music back into the theater. He is principally concerned with a reconstruction of human experience and he knows how to project that

with depth and feeling. Since the music has been reviewed in an adjacent column, it must suffice here to say that it follows the general pattern of the offering in being percussive and strident when elisions might have been helpful. What is important is the fact that the players act brilliantly, and that there is more than one occasion when "The Consul" lifts one out of one's seat with its simple situations and splendid fantasy. The climax, in which a woman asks her pardon of God after having lost everyone who is dear to her and turns on the gas, is grim. It is also something not to miss.

The company could hardly have been better selected from a theatrical standpoint. Patricia Neway brings great sympathy as well as terror to the role of Magda Sorel, who is hounded by the police and denied a chance for a new life in the maze of red tape which engulfs the consulate. She has dignity as well as pathos and her portrayal is graduated with beautiful precision from hope to despair. Marie Powers, who was to have been seen in "The Medium," is excellent as an ailing mother who dies before the somewhat agonizing denouement, and Cornell MacNeil does a fine job as the husband who is wanted by the police.

Meanwhile Gloria Lane is extremely attractive and right as the secretary of a consul who never appears except for a brief glimpse of his shadow; Leon Lishner is an ominous totalitarian agent and Andrew McKinley lends no end of color to the proceedings with his feats of magic. Horace Armistead's scenery is striking, while John Butler has contributed to the fantasy with bits of choreography. Chandler Cowles and Efreim Zimbalist Jr. should be congratulated on having produced another tense music drama in a field where it is not often exhibited. Menotti may not have achieved his ideal in "The Consul," but he is on the right track.

THE MUSIC

By Virgil Thomson

Pathos and the Macabre

"The Consul" is all Gian-Carlo Menotti's—the play, the music, the casting and stage direction—a one-man music drama concentrated and powerful. To report on it as merely a piece of music would give no idea of its real nature. To recount it as drama would not explain its intensity. It is a play of horror and deep pathos, but these qualities in it are as much a result of musical stylization as they are of dramatic exposition.

It is musical investiture, with all the stiffness of stage movement that this involves, that has allowed the author to point up the story with irony and with a comic relief that in any realistic presentation would have been offensive to taste. Also, the story might have come out weak, from the very concentration of its appeal to pity, in a more straightforward telling. All the theater conventions, indeed—prose speech, rhyme, instrumental music, song, recitative and choreography—have combined to give that story breadth of appeal and emotional perspective. Summarizing its plot I shall leave to the dramatic reviewer.

The musical score, considered alone, is apt and ever illustrative. Also, it is valuable to the narrative through its sustained emotional plan. Harmonically it is a bit chromatic and fussy, melodically a shade undistinguished. Constant undecisive modulation and the insistent repetition of melodic fragments tantalize the listener more than they satisfy musically. Recitative passages, however, are so skillfully set as to be almost unnoticeable, to provoke no listener resistance to this most perilous of all theater conventions. And the music of orchestral commentary is everywhere inventive and a help. The two big solos, a lullaby and a

denunciation scene, are valuable to the play's progress and emphasis, but musically not very memorable.

The most striking and original musico-dramatic effect in the whole spectacle is the final scene, a fifteen-minute suicide by gas. Here the orchestra and choreographer take over, though there is some singing too. A vision of death beyond the threshold, set to a waltz in coffin clothes, brings the play to a moving end by exploiting in the most daring manner Mr. Menotti's gift for combining the macabre with the pathetic. A nightmare dream scene in the second act and a hypnotist's trick on the customers waiting in the office of the consulate had prepared stylistically this finale. All the same, it is as surprising as it is brilliant and vigorous, the most hair-raising among the many virtuoso theatrical effects that the author's fancy has conceived.

In a cast notable for musical excellence Patricia Neway, as the wife of a Resistance hero, stands out as a singing actress of unusual power. Marie Powers, the Mother, though satisfactory, is less impressive. Gloria Lane, the consulate secretary, is thoroughly pleasing in every way. All the men are good, and so are the singers of secondary roles. Lehman Engel, at the conductor's desk, produces sound orchestral balances, impeccable pacing of the whole and unflinching dramatic animation. "The Consul" is a music drama of great power in a production remarkably efficient. I doubt if it makes musical history, but the musical elements contribute in a major way to a spectacle that may well have its place in our century's history of the stage. Mr. Menotti, though not quite a first-class composer, is surely a strong and original dramatic author. And music is the language that he writes his dramas in.

Journal of the American

March 16, 1950

Patricia Neway Great In Fine Musical Drama

By ROBERT GARLAND

Knowing little about music, not even knowing what I'm not supposed to like, I like Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Consul." They, meaning an ardently appreciative first audience, were giving it the hand-clap, cat-call, bravo routine as I left the Ethel Barrymore last evening. I wish I could have hung

around to help them. But, alas, I had to go and put this plaudits in the paper.

Because I, the drama critic, rather than Miles Kastendieck, the music critic, am reporting on "The Consul," don't let the "musical drama" printed in the program fool you. What Mr. Menotti, the

composer-librettist, has written is a grand opera. Or what the books on Richard Wagner call a "Gesamtkunstwerk." If I know what those Wagnerians mean. A work of several-arts-in-one.

You couldn't—I couldn't, at any rate—think of Mr. Menotti's libretto without Mr. Menotti's music. Or of Mr. Menotti's music without Mr. Menotti's libretto. Or of Mr. Menotti's libretto and music without Mr. Menotti's overall supervision. This takes in three ballets in which are a dream, a nightmare and an approach to death by way of the oven of a gas range.

Yes, while Mr. Kastendieck was sitting in Carnegie Hall listening, say, to Joseph Haydn's "L'Isola Disabitata" or Camille Saint-Saens' Third Symphony for per-

haps the thousandth time, I was sitting in the Ethel Barrymore listening to Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Consul" for the first. There is, indeed, no business like ours!

The scene of Gian-Carlo Menotti's—now that's settled—grand opera is some indefinite European country. The time is definitely today. The Consul of the title never actually appears. Not even at the very end, as does Clutterbuck at the Baltimore farther west on 47th Street. He, I take it, is something of a worldwide symbol, a dirty little dastard who isn't there.

Magda Sorel is the unhappy heroine about whom all the singing-acting revolves. Her husband, John, must, I gather, get out of the indefinite European

"The Consul"—continued

country. And Magda, who is the mother of his cradled offspring, wants more than anything, to get out with him. But she has to have a passport. Hence her visit after visit to the consulate of the dirty little dastard who isn't there.

The action switches from The Home to The Consulate, from The Consulate to The Home. For three acts and twice that many scenes, it shuttles back and forth between them. But Magda Sorel never gets her passport. No matter how she sings, no matter how she acts, the villain, a Police Agent with black looks, boots and visor, pursues her. Even unto the tragic and gaseous finale.

At the Ethel Barrymore, nobody

on-stage gets very much out of The Consul or his Consulate. Not even the Nika Magadoff who brings the single touch of lightness to Gian-Carlo Menotti's grand opera. He, with slight-of-hand by Fred Keating, pulls bunnies out of bonnets and laughs out of lamentations. Even if somewhat out of place, he's not in the least unwelcome.

This, I'm as sure as you are, is not the fair and intelligent way to write about a new grand opera by Gian-Carlo Menotti, a well established Italian-American composer-librettist with "Amelia Goes to the Ball," "Sebastian," "The Medium," "The Old Maid and the Thief," "The Island God" and

"The Telephone" already to his credit. But, not being a Miles Kastendieck, how else can a drama critic go about it?

What right have I to say, and on what grounds, that "The Consul" has Italy battling with America, grand opera compromising with Broadway? None, even if you don't ask me! Even so, I find Mr. Menotti's music holding me when Mr. Menotti's libretto isn't. Although sung throughout in English, I understand the music more frequently than I understand the words.

As Magda Sorel, Patricia Neway's is an ovation thoroughly deserved. You saw her fleetingly last season in "The Rape of Lucrece." After

last night's rendition of "To This We've Come," which actually stopped the goings-on, you'll be hearing more of her. And seeing more of her as well, for she is also a gifted young singing-actress. Her final "I Never Meant to Do This" is more than merely moving.

Marie Powers keeps herself surprisingly in hand as The Mother, with a "Lullaby" and an ensuing passage that are admirable. Cornell MacNeil is a fine John Sorel. As Nika Magadoff, Andrew McKinley is just what Mr. Menotti orders. The entire company is worthy. Lehman Engel and his orchestra outstand . . . "The Consul" is grand opera, so make the most of it. I did, and had myself a grand operatime.

The New York Times
March 16, 1950

MENOTTI 'CONSUL' HAS ITS PREMIERE

Composer Also Directed Stage
Presentation of Opera—
Tragic Story of Europe

By OLIN DOWNES

"The Consul," by Gian-Carlo Menotti, librettist and composer of the work, was given its New York premiere last night in the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. It had an unquestioned and overwhelming success. All rejoiced in this fresh discovery of Mr. Menotti's unequalled power of expression in the lyric theatre.

He has written, composed and directed this creation. He has produced an opera of eloquence, momentousness, and intensity of expression unequalled by any native composer. This opera is written from the heart, with a blazing sincerity and a passion of human understanding. It is as contemporary as the cold war, surrealism, television, the atom bomb. It is torn out of the life of the present-day world and poses an issue which mercilessly confronts humanity today. And this is done with a new wedding of the English language with music in a way which is singable, intensely dramatic and poetic by turns, and always by beauty.

Performance Is Superb

The performance of this work is of the highest credit to the modern-minded composer, coach and stage director that Mr. Menotti is, and the high intelligence and sincerity of a remarkable group of young American singers. They are not hardened routiners. There are, of course, ways in which they can grow as singing actors and vocal interpreters. But they have a sovereign spirit, and youth and comprehending enthusiasm for a new kind of music-drama.

And last but not least: for once, for just once in our operatic ex-

perience, an entire cast does justice to a beautiful and eminently singable English. We have more than once remarked that we are not sympathetic to opera translated into English, but most enthusiastic for opera composed in English. Mr. Menotti has a profound love and comprehension of the language, and his interpreters carried through his creative feelings. Add to this the superbly modern staging in a remarkably integrated performance.

Each act is connected by an orchestral interlude. In the second act occurs the grandmother's lullaby to the dying child; the strange dream of Magda, when her husband comes back, with a woman he describes as his loving sister, of whom Magda is somewhat terrified, and who has the face of the cold-blooded secretary, with a new malice and evil in the features. This is a dream dialogue in a kind of macabre ballad form of question and response, and fantastical orchestration.

The smash of the pane of glass announces the message from the husband. The window-mender brings it. The chief of police enters, with brutal questioning and sardonic threats. The child has died, Magda goes again to the consulate. There the Magician, Nika Magadoff, who hypnotizes the assembled company. He makes them dream of a ball room and dancing with the beloved. The secretary tells the Magician to end that, it is irregular and produce his papers. He pulls everything from his clothes—a rabbit, bunting, gewgaws of all sorts. But the papers there are none. He apologizes. Even a great artist has to make a living.

In the third act Magda is told that she must stop John from returning by some message or the lives of all the group will be sacrificed. Her final resolve is made, but too late. The husband returns to the consulate, seeking her. He is seized by the police, as the secretary, at last awakening to evil, assures him something will be done about this in the morning. The end is simplest of all. The telephone ringing repeatedly, Magda returning, "I never meant to do this." And turning on the gas stove.

One would think this would be obvious and banal. It is not. It is

grandly tragic. And the dying woman has visions—of her husband as he came to woo her, of her mother, wonderfully young, of the revolving dancers in the consulate, of the magician, who again commands, "Look in my eyes, look in my eyes," and ask for rest. The visions recede. The room is empty. The woman falls back unconscious. The telephone rings, the curtain falls.

The flexibility of this score, its mixture of free rhythms and realistic effects with sustained lyrical passages at the inevitable moment is thrice admirable. The concert numbers are used in the way that only the composer has at his disposal. While the secretary, for example, is assuring the lady that her papers are ready, and they sing the monotonous duet about signing them properly, Magda and Assan, the window mender, are making their last desperate resolve. While the Magician talks of his tricks the others, in a quartet, sing of their misery and their need.

Everything lends, and the dramatic structure is of the most precise and proportionate kind. And when the big moment is needed, Mr. Menotti supplies it in the superbly constructed aria of Magda, denouncing the secretary and her bureaucratic ways, at the end of the second act. Then, after this shattering climax, comes the coup de theatre. Magda may see the Consul, says the secretary. He has a very important visitor. Their shadows are seen, saying farewell to each other, against the glass pane door. The door opens. The VIP emerges—the Chief, the terrible Chief of Police. Magda falls insensible to the ground.

Neway Tops Cast

Individually speaking, the cast was led dramatically by Patricia Neway, whose warm, brilliant voice and spirit, and feeling for her role, enabled her to give the fullest interpretive value to every note and every word, whether it was of sustained melody or graphic recitation. The climax of her nobly fashioned aria—that is what it is—at the end of the second act simply stopped the show for minutes, and overwhelmed the audience.

Marie Powers is now well known for the richness of her voice, her temperament and ability in characterization. Her cradle song was

the first occasion for interrupting applause, and she had greater and less conventional moments when she made the most of another lyrical passages the composer has given her. Andrew McKinley is one of the finds of this cast-finds in the sense of a wholly unconventional role that he sang and interpreted with greatest skill, dexterity, vocal brilliance and imagination.

Maria Mario with her fine voice and style, and irresistible speech and song of the naive, unhappy little Italian woman in her grief; Cornell MacNeil's John, excellently sung and presented with appropriate pathos and simplicity; the excellent and affecting Kofner of George Jorganyans stood out. One of the best of them all was Gloria Lane, who has a fine voice and style, which she entirely subordinated to the representation of all the secretariat officiousness and red tape of the world. And when the secretary, awakening to the truth, saw the faces, in her imagination, peering at her from the walls, there was the breaking of the ice in a hitherto unemotional surface, that marked the unfolding of a character. One did want a more sinister Chief of Police, but all these figures blended so excellently in the dramatic ensemble that none of them was inadequate. The firm and authoritative conducting of Lehman Engel and his treatment of the score was an outstanding feature of the occasion.

And what of the inherent quality of the music per se? One cannot think of it, in the first place, as music in a category by itself. This is an opera made of inseparable strands of speech, song, action, scene. Technically, Mr. Menotti has the whole operatic vocabulary of the romantic and modern composers at his disposal. He can write in the most simple, direct, melodic manner. Or he can go contrapuntal, or use at will polytonality, cross rhythms, the most varied orchestration. He knows how to make a few strings chant requiem in the most modern way, and he knows how to rumble with kettle drums on the lowest tones of the piano to make the effect of escaping gas and impending doom.

A modern, originally conceived, and wonderfully integrated opera triumphed.

"The Consul"—continued

DAILY NEWS

March 16, 1950

Menotti's 'The Consul' Brilliant; Patricia Neway a Dramatic Find

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Gian-Carlo Menotti, the American-Italian composer and librettist who won fame with his thriller, "The Medium," has continued to progress. His "The Consul," which was given a brilliant production at the Barrymore Theatre last evening, is an exciting opera by a man who has extraordinary gifts.

The story is vividly theatrical—the kind of story that Carol Reed and Graham Greene might have whipped into one of those quiet, intense movie dramas. It is about a young couple who are trying to get out of some unnamed country into some other happier country with their baby and the baby's grandmother. They are hounded by secret police and baffled by the red tape of getting a visa from the consulate of the happier country.

As a piece of theatre alone, "The Consul" is skillfully plotted.

As a piece of music, this opera also is adroit. It bears the Menotti stamp which was evident in "The Medium"—a peculiar and dissonant singsong in the narrative pas-

sages and a bold and imaginative orchestration in the dramatic moments. I would say from a first hearing of this music that Menotti is working for himself and by himself; he is not trying to be excessively modern and he is not particularly respectful toward old operatic conventions. He is an individual, and he manages to be an individual without resorting to phony musical stunts.

Cleverly Staged.

As a piece of staging, "The Consul" is impressive. Its singers can act. Its mood and its movement are all of one piece.

Well, since Menotti did the whole

show—the theatre, the music, the staging—he certainly is a man of extraordinary gifts. He is fortunate in having producers, Chandler Cowles and Efreim Zimbalist Jr., who are not afraid of taking him right to Broadway in competition with the girly musicals. He is fortunate in having an excellent orchestra conducted by Lehman Engel to present his score. He is fortunate further in having had Horace Armistead and Jean Rosenthal to design and light two perfect settings—a modest home and the cold, bare office of a consul.

The players and singers of Mr. Menotti's company are admirable. Marie Powers, who found fame as the medium in "The Medium," has another good dramatic role and a very touching song to a dying baby in its cradle.

Miss Neway a Find.

The newly famous one surely must be Patricia Neway, who is

the hapless wife who wants to get out of the country and never makes it. Miss Neway has a fine, sure voice and an instinct for character portrayal, and her bitter protest against the red tape of a consular office, "Papers, papers," earned the almost hysterical cheers it got last evening.

Among the others of a small and able company are Cornell MacNeil, who plays the fugitive husband; Gloria Lane, a cold-hearted consular secretary whose job finally gets her down and makes her cry in anguish, "All those faces!"; Leon Lishner as a secret policeman right out of the best movie thrillers, and Andrew McKinley as a magician.

The magician business is another reason why Menotti is interesting as a showman. With all the people trying to get exit visas from a hated country, why shouldn't one of them be a ham entertainer? Mr. McKinley, in addition to being a very good tenor with a very good song, tries to beguile the secretary with real tricks. And as a prestidigitator he is first rate, thanks to the training of Fred Keating.

I don't think "The Consul" is grand opera. It is more clever than heroic. But it most certainly is top-grade musical theatre.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

March 16, 1950

'The Consul' a Hit; Electrifies Audience

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night with "The Consul," Gian-Carlo Menotti put a hefty unanswerable veto on the gloomy argument that the theater is dead or even very sick.

Here is lyric drama of freshness and freedom, carved to the bone in every element, so it repeatedly jolts you till your teeth jar.

More importantly, here is theater talking intimately about the world of today and tomorrow. This is the story of the Twentieth Century's oppressed, told vividly enough to strike home in a Park Avenue penthouse.

Police State Story.

Menotti's narrative has more than enough guts and tension to serve movies or radio, not to mention TV, at their best. His people live in a police state. Their constant urge is to get across the border before it is too late.

Always the struggle is against

red tape. A woman being trailed by madmen cannot keep coming back tomorrow, again and again, to sign her name some more. Routine and personal emergency are at tragic odds. So the woman comes back anyway, more haunted each time. The bureau can afford to take its time and pass the buck. She can do neither.

Magda Sorel's husband, known to be part of an underground, fighting unidentified despots, has escaped. While she waits and hopes and tries to join him, her child dies. Later his mother dies. Then she learns that he is coming back for her.

Time Is Winner.

Because this would endanger everyone connected with the fighters for freedom, she makes the only sacrifice she can to prevent his return. Like all the rest of her fight against time, it is

too late.

It would be a mistake to outline the final climax of this work. Sometimes the events are not unsuspected, but they still have magnificent suspense with the question of how long they will take to occur.

Suspense and dramatic shock are Menotti's principal tools. It is his immense fertility for dramatic effect that makes "The Consul" so vivid. Constantly there are peaks of action that electrify you and leave you worn out. Repeatedly the composer tops them.

Simple Lyric Unity.

His joining of dialogue and music is so simple and natural that it is like picking up with both hands a weight that might be too much for either one.

But Menotti uses music to relax the drama. Consequently his medium can stand big punches when he needs them.

"The Consul" opens with a shocker. Offstage there is a decadent kind of torch song on a phonograph. Suddenly the door to the dim room bangs open. Sorel staggers in and falls against a bench loaded with tools, which clatter to the floor.

Never a Dull Moment.

From this discordant start there is not a dull moment until the final curtain. The second of the three acts is probably the most dramatically solid. In the first scene, after a weird lullaby by the grandmother, Magda goes

through a nightmare that reaches a terrible climax with a vision of her baby, dead.

In the second scene there is a strange ironical sequence when a magician hypnotizes the people waiting for visas in the Consular office, and makes them dance awkwardly around as if in a ballroom. This is barely ended, when Magda goes into a wild and bitter denunciation of the torture they are all going through. Last night this seemed likely to stop the performance permanently, so insistent was the applause.

Then for a moment, Magda receives hope. As she rushes into the Consul's office, she meets, coming out, the one man who must have ruined her chances. At the curtain she has fainted.

Cast Is Excellent.

Menotti's score is not the kind you lift items from to sing. But there are memorable passages besides those already mentioned, notably a farewell trio at the start, a quintet at the end of the first act, and the dramatically counterpointed last scene in the consulate.

Of the excellent cast, Patricia Neway as Magda became a star over Gotham by 10 o'clock last night, and Marie Powers proved once more her substantial and imperious vocal and dramatic ability. Of the rest of the singing actors, the excellent conducting of Lehman Engel, the sets and costumes, more at a later date.

"Tobacco Road"



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

March 7, 1950

Negro Drama Group Does 'Tobacco Road'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Sex sopped and sordid, "Tobacco Road" seems, like Ol' Man River, to just keep rolling along. The latest reincarnation at the 48th Street Theater is a production of the Negro Drama Group, and the actors play it with a great deal of enthusiasm.

It does not seem likely that many people will consider this a social document, despite its remarkable history of consecutive longevity. Erskine Caldwell's material about depraved and poverty-stricken share croppers may be

illuminating, but the dramatization emphasizes the coarseness of the characters over any high purpose.

The Lowly Lesters.

For practicing the motto "Nothing Sacred," there has never been a family like the Lesters of Tobacco Road. They are dirty, indolent, immoral, and so dishonest that the very use of that word seems out of place.

When he is not scratching or claiming most of the neighborhood children as his own Jeeter pretends he is thinking about planting a crop. That is as close

as he ever gets to it.

His ancient mother is treated like a lame dog, and his local children are a fancy collection that includes a childish son, a hare-lipped daughter whose sex life is a matter of overt and constant frustration, and a pathological coward whom he has sold for \$7 to a husband she will have nothing to do with.

Only Desperate Hope.

Jeeter's wife Ada desperately hopes that at least Pearl will get out of their grimy existence and find some better life for herself. The idiotic Dude marries himself off to a gluttonous revivalist, who actually buys him with a new auto.

There always has been an audience for this play, and there might be again, one suspects chiefly because of the inevitable feeling of superiority it arouses. No matter what depths they achieve, nobody can be any lower than the Lesters.

The present cast copes with the animal vagaries of the Tobacco Road family in as expert a fashion as is possible. Powell Lindsay bears down on the comic

"TOBACCO ROAD"

Revival of the play by Jack Kirkland, based on the novel by Erskine Caldwell; staged by Evelyn Ellis; sponsored by Mr. Kirkland; presented by the Negro Drama Group at the 48th Street Theatre, March 6, 1950. The cast: Dude Lester.....Jimmy Wright Ada Lester.....Evelyn Ellis Jeeter Lester.....Powell Lindsay Ellie May.....Baby Joyce Grandma Lester..... Estelle Hemsley Lov Bensey.....John Tate Henry Peabody..... Cherokee Thornton Sister Bessie Rice..... Mercedes Gilbert Pearl.....Delores Mack Captain Tim.....John Mark George Payne.....John Boule

side of Jeeter, which is a good idea. Evelyn Ellis, who staged the show, has a pitiful dignity as Ada, the mother, and Baby Joyce makes Ellie May a fantastic citizen of Slobovia.

Daily Mirror

March 7, 1950

Negro Group Presents 'Fine Tobacco Road'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Jack Kirkland brought his phenomenal hit, "Tobacco Road," back to Broadway last evening. The current revival has been staged by the Negro Drama Group, under the direction of Evelyn Ellis. It's a first-rate production, too; equal to those played for so many years by white actors.

It has always been a mystery to us how this rowdy and blasphemous vaudeville show ever

ran for over 2,000 performances, setting, at the time, a new long-run record for the theatre. A

record surpassed by only one other play, "Life With Father." Sordid, suggestive and cheap, it just never has been our dish.

Watching the animal-like degenerate, backward Lesters frolic in depressing filth and poverty, hearing them cuss interminably, has never been one of our major pleasures. We are seldom amused by them and even more seldom touched by their plight. The characters have so little genuine integrity and honesty as to fail to merit our sympathy.

Perhaps a real tragedy could have been fashioned from the Erskine Caldwell novel, but it hasn't been. It isn't even good melodrama. Rather, it is unmitigated hokum cut from a smutty bolt of cloth. We always leave a

performance of "Tobacco Road" with an urgent desire to get a cake of germicidal soap at the nearest drugstore and rush home for a cleansing shower.

Powell Lindsay is a vigorous and resourceful Jeeter Lester. He had the first-nighters howling with his antics and oaths. Evelyn Ellis, as Jeeter's wife, Ada, and John Tate, as the helpless Lov Bensey, play with admirable restraint and effect, Mercedes Gilbert is a rip-roaring Sister Bessie.

There's a \$2.50-plus-tax top for the current engagement of "Tobacco Road" at the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre. And this excellent revival is worth every cent of it, if you happen to like "Tobacco Road." We don't.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

March 7, 1950

'Tobacco Road'

By Vernon Rice

When Jack Kirkland's adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road" opened back in December, 1933, to achieve the second longest run of any play in the history of the theatre, it was not welcomed with open arms by the critical fraternity. Had the public paid any attention to the surveyors of the drama, the play's only possibly remembered fame would have been the swiftness with which it made its way to the then existing Cain's warehouse.

That should give some comfort

to Jack Kirkland today. He chose to bring last night a revival of the saga of those Georgia Crackers, the Jeeter Lesters, as acted by the Negro Drama Group, to the same theatre, the 48th St., which housed his play in '33.

Under normal circumstances, I would say that the notices it will receive today would have the management posting the show's closing notice immediately. But "Tobacco Road's" story has not been the usual one. If bad taste, over-acting, squalid doings, filth and lechery guarantee success, then this production's stay might make the first one of eight years seem short-lived.

In the early days of the original "Tobacco Road" the audience, if it looked hard enough, could find the tragedy of a man married to a little strip of land unable to eke out the barest living. Poverty had reduced him and his family to animalism, but his faithfulness to the earth of his forefathers had given him almost a touch of nobility.

As the play advanced into its later years and the cast changes became numerous, all that went

out the window, as the playing became as broad as it was vulgar.

The Negro Drama Group takes up where the closing company left off and nothing has changed but the world. A great many things have happened since the play ended its first stay to make the problems presented in Kirkland's dramatization seem antiquated. Had it been presented as a piece showing the evils of a Depression Era, perhaps it might have been accepted.

As done in the present revival for a reason that is not apparent to this observer, the play could have been better left in the storehouse.

If it were done for novelty, it offered none. If it were presented for the betterment of racial understanding, then Jack Kirkland in producing this "Tobacco Road" so shoddily and so poorly has given the cause no aid.